

To co-opt or coerce? State capacity, regime strategy, and organized religion in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam

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Abstract

This article explores the dynamic relationship between states, authoritarian regimes, and organized religion in the ostensibly Marxist-Leninist states of Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam. Despite espousing an initial shared ideological commitment toward curbing the influence of domestic religion, actual regime policies toward these groups have varied considerably over time. I argue that the explanation for this difference can be found in unpacking the strength of each regime's state apparatus. This article introduces a new typological theory for understanding how state capacity has shaped the divergent strategies Cambodian, Lao and Vietnamese regimes have employed to manage organized religion during the post-Vietnam War era (1975 to present). In brief, I argue that regime elites in Vietnam have successfully co-opted organized religion through the state bureaucracy. Conversely, Marxist-inspired regimes in Cambodia and Laos have oscillated between policies of coercive violence and strategic accommodation to dilute the power of domestic religious groups.

Keywords

authoritarianism, Buddhism, Cambodia, Catholicism, Laos, religion, state capacity, Vietnam

Introduction

Organized religion in the region once popularly known as French Indochina has weathered significant threats to its survival. The second half of the 20th century ushered in a bloody civil war in Laos (1959–1975), a genocide in Cambodia (1975–1979), and two major wars in Vietnam against

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French and American occupation (1946–1975). While these conflicts unleashed unimaginable horrors against their respective civilian populations, they also permanently altered the nature of state–society relations. The authoritarian regimes that came to dominate post-war Vietnam, Laos, and Cambodia were vexed by religion as an alternative locus of social power. In Laos and Cambodia, for example, Theravada Buddhism structured relations between the monarch and society, but also had a more practical function. Buddhist monks traditionally educated a large percentage of the population, particularly at the village level. Simultaneously, various animist and syncretic religions traditionally posed a threat to Buddhist cultural hegemony well before 1975. This historical legacy was not only ideologically out of sync with the Marxist-Leninist tradition but posed a potential threat to modern political and social reorganization in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam.⁴

The year 1975 marks a critical juncture in understanding the overall trajectory of the regime–religion nexus in each of these countries. For the first time, Marxist-inspired regimes seized political power in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam and instituted new policies aimed at neutralizing perceived threats to their authority posed by organized religion. Formally, this represented an ideological break from the past, as monarchical patronage of Buddhism in Laos and Cambodia was the norm, while in South Vietnam (RVN), successive US-backed regimes worked to counter both Buddhist and communist resistance.

Critically, different wartime experiences contributed to the relative strengths and weaknesses of each state, and thus the coercive and bureaucratic tools post-1975 regimes could use against organized religion. In Vietnam, the Viet Minh and CPV (Communist Party of Vietnam) gradually enhanced their state power through military campaigns against French, American, and South Vietnamese armed forces. Employing tax collection programs and land seizures as early as the 1940s, they were able to extract financial resources from ordinary citizens, thus creating the early foundations for a strong post-war state (Beresford, 1988: 28–29). In Laos and Cambodia, the Pathet Lao and Khmer Rouge insurgencies expanded as a result of conflict spillover from neighboring Vietnam. American-led bombing raids along the Ho Chi Minh trail served as an important recruitment tool for Marxist insurgents and further weakened the appeal of domestic political elites (Chandler, 1991: 225–226). The major difference, which is critical for understanding contrasting approaches to organized religion in each country, is that neither the Pathet Lao or Khmer Rouge engaged in state-building activities to the same extent that the pre-1975 Viet Minh and CPV had in Vietnam. Additionally, the legacy of weak states and even weaker regimes in Laos and Cambodia meant that the rebels were able to seize the capitals of Vientiane and Phnom Penh with minimal resistance. Paradoxically, this put both groups at a disadvantage when it came to governing because they were tasked with extensive state-building in rural areas.

Since regimes in the region inherited quite different states, prospects for containing the influence of organized religion also varied considerably. Furthermore, the divergent pathways taken by each regime since 1975—the year when communist regimes in all three countries officially took power—is not coincidental. While each was ideologically committed to diminishing the organizational capacity and symbolic appeal of religion in their states, differences in relative state capacity endowment provide the most compelling reason for why the weak bureaucratic/administrative states of Cambodia and Laos oscillated between co-optation and coercion, while Vietnam was able to co-opt and supervise religious hierarchy through a Chinese CCP model of state-regulated churches (Reny, 2018).

The article proceeds as follows. First, I will provide an overview of major conceptual and theoretical approaches essential to understanding the nature of modern states, non-

democratic regimes, and the important socio-political role of organized religion in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam. Next, I will introduce a new typology for understanding the interactive relationship between states, regimes, and organized religion. Finally, I will make important linkages between the relative strengths or weaknesses of states and how these have shaped regime policies toward religious groups in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam since 1975.

States, regimes, and organized religion

As the state is an ambiguous term, it is important to unpack its key features. At base, all modern states possess varying degrees of coercive and bureaucratic/administrative components.⁵ In Weberian terms, coercive power refers to the state's ability to compel its citizens into compliance in both normative and legal terms (Weber et al., 2014). Concretely, this is typically accomplished through the real or implied threat of physical violence. Under both democratic and authoritarian forms of government, functioning states wield the ultimate authority to punish detractors. The military, police, and prisons are the most visible manifestations of this authority. States also feature bureaucratic/administrative power, which refers to the former's ability to collect tax, build and manage civilian infrastructure, and regulate civil society. In certain democratic contexts, the state may possess a high degree of both coercive and bureaucratic/administrative power, but often refrains from exercising the former against civilians for normative reasons.⁶

In problematizing the dual nature of the state, we gain a better understanding of how authoritarian regimes, unconstrained by the rule of law, but perhaps constrained by competing elites, make use of the tools at their disposal. This is critical for explaining how regimes interact with society, and why some resort to violent crackdowns, while others lean heavily on pre-existing bureaucratic resources for co-opting resistance.

Authoritarian regimes lack the natural legitimacy afforded to democracies for the precise reason that they are not elected—a phenomenon Svobik (2012: 10) labels the “original sin” of dictatorships. As such, the task falls upon authoritarian regime elites to foster alternative sources of legitimacy.⁷ This is typically accomplished in one or more of the following ways: the regime will attempt to create or capitalize on a preexisting unifying ideology propagated through a single political party, or it will co-opt citizens through either targeted or general economic or political perks. Simultaneously, or if these forms of co-optation are ineffective, authoritarian regimes will leverage physical threats, incarceration, or violent crackdowns against their detractors. In the latter scenario, the purpose is not solely to eliminate a perceived threat to the regime, but also to communicate a strong message to other would-be violators.

While nearly all authoritarian regimes will use a combination of the above tactics at different times, I argue that regime elites prefer to co-opt rather than punish society at large with rare exceptions, particularly in the face of religiously based resistance. On the one hand, violent crackdowns against citizens are costly. While violent repression sometimes provides a short-term solution to a broader regime legitimacy problem, it may also further erode popular legitimacy, while setting the stage for elite defections from the military and the party. Secondly, religious actors, particularly in Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam, possess moral authority. In short, jailing or killing religious figures may be taboo in the eyes of citizens and politicians alike.⁸

If co-optation and regulation through official bureaucratic channels mitigates the political risks associated with widespread violent crackdowns, why don't all regimes utilize this strategy? Official ideology only provides a partial explanation. In 1975, Laos, Cambodia, and Vietnam governed

according to a Marxist-Leninist philosophy.⁹ Yet, regime treatment of organized religion has varied over time, as reflected in a general pattern of state patronage of Buddhism in Laos, tempered by coercive measures aimed at dissident religious minorities, violent crackdowns against Buddhist monks in Cambodia, and the extensive bureaucratic regulation of Buddhism, Catholicism, and syncretic belief systems in Vietnam. While regimes in Laos and Cambodia have sought to construct organizations capable of regulating religion, weak bureaucratic state apparatuses in both countries have led to alternating policies of co-optation and coercion.

The patterns of interaction between the state, regimes, and organized religion are highly contextual and constituted historically. As opposed to Catholicism or Islam, which are universalist in mission, Buddhism in Southeast Asia tends to take on a national character (McCargo, 2004: 215). In this sense, the relationship between the role of religious adherents and political activity also tends to be ambiguous. As Buddhist scriptures and religious tradition have always operated within the context of a state (modern or pre-modern), there is no clear line of demarcation between the merits of active religious participation or, alternatively, quietism. While there is a tradition of social engagement in Mahayana Buddhism, it differs from Catholic social teaching, which is universally prescribed to followers by the Catholic Church. Similarly, since there is no transnational centralized authority in Buddhism as contrasted to Catholicism; political questions tend to be worked out on a case-to-case basis. While some Buddhists have maintained that participation in politics is a moral requisite, others have expressed their disdain for politics as an activity beneath their dignity. States, on the other hand, have a similarly awkward relationship with religious adherents. While courting Buddhism and its most prominent leaders is an important way of gaining legitimacy, there are numerous examples across Southeast Asia of political leaders seeking to “purify” monasteries from monks, who by their very involvement in secular affairs allegedly sully the prestige of the religion. Furthermore, the nature of religious practice in Southeast Asia tends to be highly complex, making it difficult for regimes to single out individuals (apart from those who act in formal clerical roles) solely based on religious identity.

Finally, religious expression takes both public and private forms. While the latter is significant as a means of understanding individual motivations for social behavior, any relationship between regime strategy and personal beliefs of citizens operates on different levels of analysis. Non-democratic regimes in Southeast Asia and abroad have targeted individuals for their religious convictions, though it stands to reason that when religious sentiments are transformed into collective action this presents a greater threat to authoritarian governance. Therefore, this research analyzes the dynamic relationship between regimes and organized religion, or groups (small or large) that express their beliefs publicly through collective action.

Theory and methods

This article features a new typology that links state capacity to regime strategies toward organized religion. The typology itself does not intend to posit a perfect causal relationship between these variables. Rather, I argue that state capacity structures the range of strategic options available to non-democratic regimes. The relationship between the variables is probabilistic, suggesting that coercive and bureaucratic/administrative power influences regime strategy most of the time. In the spirit of typological theorizing, there is no dogmatic intention to dismiss out-of-hand other sufficient explanations for a given outcome, such as the significance of ideology or the personality traits of leaders. Instead, it is my intention to demonstrate that state capacity provides a more

compelling explanation for regime strategy toward organized religion than either ideology or individual psychological attributes.

Methodologically, this research takes a qualitative, comparative approach. The Most Similar Systems Design (MSSD) is employed, as the cases under consideration all share important historical and political similarities. In short, the MSSD is utilized to compare similar cases in the interests of finding out how cases differ on the outcome variable. On the topic of MSSD, Teune and Przeworski (1970: 32) write: "it is anticipated that if some important differences are found among these otherwise similar countries, then the number of factors attributable to these differences will be sufficiently small to warrant explanation in terms of these differences alone." When engaging in MSSD, case selection proves to be critical, as the inclusion of one or more dissimilar cases creates the possibility for alternative explanatory or intervening variables to emerge. My case selection permits more opportunities to detect important variations on the dependent variables; specifically, the decision for a regime to coerce or co-opt organized religion. Qualitative historical case studies aim to uncover the complex relationship between state capacity, regime strategy, and organized religion through an exhaustive examination of the secondary literature. This case study research also allows contextual comparison, permitting a more nuanced understanding of the hypothesized relationship.

Table 1 represents a typology of state capacity as defined by its stock of coercive and bureaucratic/administrative resources. I propose that a regime's decision to co-opt or coerce is shaped by its own estimates of these attributes. Crucially, this typological theory is crafted in such a way as to allow for variation in strategies under the same regime. For example, the Socialist Republic of Vietnam, embedded in a state with high degrees of both bureaucratic/administrative and coercive capacity, can choose co-optation as its preferred strategy, while still resorting to violence under the unlikely scenario where it deems the use of force necessary to repress a domestic challenge to the state.

As the upper-left quadrant illustrates, consolidated democracies are rich in bureaucratic administrative capacity, but low in coercive capacity, as they typically require the consent of the governed to impose their will. Since this article limits itself to the authoritarian context, states strong in bureaucratic/administrative capacity that also feature weak coercive apparatuses will not be considered.¹⁰

States with high coercive capacity and low bureaucratic/administrative capacity are rare, though not without precedent. During Cambodia's brief but devastating Khmer Rouge era, Pol Pot and his henchmen were able to seize power and forcibly transfer Phnom Penh's urban population to the killing fields. Absent a coherent state bureaucracy, the regime ruled exclusively through brutality, while never building the administrative institutions required of a modern Weberian state. Finally, states low in coercive and bureaucratic/administrative capacity are in the weakest position to manage civil society threats.¹¹ As evidenced by patterns of governance in Laos and Cambodia (post-1980), regimes will alternate between coercion and co-optation, hoping that one or more of these approaches will bring about the desired result.

Coercive and bureaucratic/administrative capacity can be measured in a variety of ways (Cingolani, 2013). Most relevant to how regimes deal with organized religion, I rely on two proxies in this article. For coercive capacity, I consider each country's military in terms of total uniformed personnel as a percentage of the national labor force as well as the percentage of annual GDP spent (World Bank, 2018, 2019). For bureaucratic/administrative data, I rely upon the World Bank's Government Effectiveness Index (Kaufmann et al., 2010).¹² These data are contextualized

through a historical/comparative case study methodology. Though this data is not comprehensive, I posit that state capacity, unlike specific regime policies, does not change quickly.

Cambodia

The Khmer Rouge emerged in Cambodia because of French colonial occupation and the broader Cold War conflict in Indochina (Ford, 2017). The horrors inflicted during the Khmer Rouge period are reflective of a regime that relied almost entirely on its coercive apparatus to govern. Much has already been written concerning the genocidal behavior of the Khmer Rouge (see Kiernan, 1981, 1985, 1996; Cribb, 2010), and any new attempt to explain why the Khmer Rouge declared a total war on society cannot ignore the role of their ideology, which was consciously modeled after China's Cultural Revolution. Emphasis should also be placed on Pol Pot's psychology, with his personal paranoia and delusions of grandeur playing a central role in explaining why he brutalized not just average Cambodians but also close associates within the Khmer Rouge.¹³ Still other plausible explanations focus squarely on domestic politics in Cambodia, noting that prince-turned-politician Sihanouk's detachment from political reality at the most critical times cost the country dearly (Osborne, 1994). Notwithstanding these important variables, it was ultimately the weakness of the Cambodian state that permitted the Khmer Rouge to seize power in the first place. In other words, a state with a stronger coercive apparatus would have likely been able to defeat the Khmer Rouge insurgency before it reached the outskirts of Phnom Penh. Similarly, the bureaucratic/administrative dysfunction inherent to post-independence regimes in Cambodia, in part, led poorer, rural Cambodians to declare their loyalty to a Maoist insurgent group.

To the casual observer, Khmer Rouge violence, which resulted in the deaths of roughly 2 million Cambodians in four years (1975–1979), appears to have been rather indiscriminate. This claim is not entirely without merit, as many Cambodians were executed under mere suspicion of traitorous behavior. Yet in other cases, violence was deliberately employed against Vietnamese and Cham Muslim minorities,¹⁴ urban dwellers,¹⁵ and Buddhist monks. With respect to Buddhism, the Khmer Rouge initially saw some utility in co-opting Buddhist slogans and symbols to attract support from the traditional peasant population. Similarly, it also made some early distinctions between rural and urban monks, viewing the latter with considerably more suspicion (Harris, 2005: 171). Yet, on the whole, Buddhism was viewed by the Khmer Rouge as a corrupting influence on the population. Hinton (2005) argues that the Khmer Rouge saw Buddhism as loathsome because it rationalized inequality by linking it to the doctrine of Karma (Hinton, 2005: 128).

Shortly after taking power, the Khmer Rouge claimed that 90–95% of monks “disappeared” (Kiernan, 2008: 100). Harris (2001: 74) adds: “In its initial stages the persecution of Buddhism involved the intimidation and re-education of the laity resulting in a steady diminution of alms-giving, coupled with the relocation of monks to ‘safer areas’.” The Khmer Rouge outlawed all religious practice, with defrocked Buddhist monks sent to agricultural collectives to work alongside other Cambodians. By 1975, virtually all monasteries were closed. Between 1975 and 1979, 63% of monks had either been killed by the regime or died from starvation (Harris, 1999: 66). Many more Cambodian monks fled the country, making the dangerous trek across the Mekong into Thailand. By the time of the Vietnamese invasion in 1979, there were only around 100 ordained monks left in Cambodia (Harris, 1999: 66).

By 1979, the Khmer Rouge leadership corps, plagued by paranoia, internal purges, and economic devastation, were careering toward regime collapse. At this time, Pol Pot grew increasingly

fearful of a Vietnamese invasion.¹⁶ In response, he launched a pre-emptive attack into Vietnam which was met with a swift response. Pol Pot and the remnants of the Khmer Rouge were pushed into remote territory in western Cambodia, where they continued to fight a guerilla campaign against the Vietnamese until the late 1980s. Despite the Khmer Rouge's military defeat, they continued to play an important role in the country's politics well into the 1990s.¹⁷

After the fall of the Khmer Rouge, and Vietnam's invasion, Pol Pot and his loyalists continued to fight a protracted guerilla war against the newly formed People's Republic of Kampuchea. During this period (1979–1989), the *sangha*¹⁸ was still subject to repression, though nowhere on a par with the violence undertaken by the Khmer Rouge. The state allowed Buddhist monks to practice their religion, though under tight regulations. Monks were highly encouraged to preach on the ideological compatibilities between Marxism and Buddhism. Furthermore, "unofficial monks" were frequently disrobed during the 1980s, and many were sent to fortify the border with Thailand.

Upon the collapse of the Soviet Union, material support for the communist regime waned, and the constitutional monarchy was eventually restored. Under the new State of Cambodia (SOC), Buddhism was implemented as the official state religion. Despite greater regime tolerance for Buddhism, the Cambodian *sangha* remains weak and highly fragmented, and has thus far been unable to overcome the legacy of communist repression. Regime violence against Cambodian monks has been common, particularly during the lead-up to elections.

During the Vietnamese era (1979–1989), there was a clear attempt on the part of the occupying regime to co-opt Khmer Buddhism to serve their political goals. While monks were originally required to carry ID cards, engage in agricultural work, and support the stated goals of the regime, roughly 3000 monks were ordained in the early 1980s, and 700 new pagodas were constructed (Harris, 2001: 75). Specifically, the Vietnamese regime immediately appointed seven top Khmer monks to bolster their legitimacy among a skeptical Cambodian public (Kent, 2006: 353). Additionally, while monasteries in Cambodia have traditionally represented an autonomous zone free from direct state intervention, the Communist Party of Vietnam (CPV) and the Cambodian People's Party (CPP) have co-opted rituals such as the consecration of monasteries through ostentatious displays of generosity and public piety (Kent, 2006: 365).

Politically, the Vietnamese governed through the People's Republic of Kampuchea. At this time, the Vietnamese sought to reunify the broken *sangha*, through re-education programs. Administratively, Vietnam appointed the Ven. Top Vong to head the *sangha*. While this move represented a renewed tolerance for Buddhism in Cambodia, it was viewed skeptically by many Cambodians who felt that Vong would only serve the interests of the CPV. In 1985, Hun Sen, a former member of the Khmer Rouge, took power, a position he holds to this day. In 1989, beginning with the gradual Vietnamese withdrawal from Cambodia, Prime Minister Hun Sen publicly apologized for 'mistakes' toward Buddhism, with public officials beginning to patronize Buddhism through pious acts (Harris, 2001: 76)

Following the departure of the Vietnamese, the United Nations sponsored peace accords (1992), which resulted in a shaky political alliance between Royalists, the Vietnamese-supported Communist People's Party (CPP), and former Khmer Rouge affiliates. Once this government collapsed, Hun Sen reasserted his power in Cambodia, and moved to make Buddhism the official state religion. As part of this initiative, the Sen regime sponsored the creation of state Pali language schools and a new Buddhist Institute (Harris, 2001: 70). Despite his authoritarian tendencies, Hun Sen has taken a more relaxed approach to Buddhist practice in Cambodia. He has reopened several temples and Buddhist schools under his rule (Harris, 1999: 68). Of this period, Harris (1999: 71) writes: "The visible presence of the *sangha* and its unique significance as the only

institution able to operate throughout the country has ensured that almost all governments have felt the need to cultivate it whatever their political philosophy.” Kent (2006: 35) observes that, “In Cambodia, power is still conceived as dwelling in the Buddhist pagodas, and access to such power is a necessary component to political survival.” Willingness on the part of the Hun Sen regime to use both violence and patronage as carrots and sticks puts the country’s *sangha* in an awkward position. Kent (2006: 357) elaborates on this contradiction, writing: “While today’s morally depleted and subservient Buddhism may still be helping to secure the power of today’s elite as monks are co-opted by them, it may be less able to put a brake on their brutality or despotism.”

While Hun Sen’s rule has been characterized by a gradual liberalization of religious restrictions, he has not hesitated to crack down on religious figures. Sen and his security apparatus violently attacked monks protesting fraud in the 1998 elections, resulting in the shooting deaths of several young monks (Kent, 2006: 356). Massive electoral violence also erupted during the 2003 elections, with the regime engaging in large-scale voter intimidation efforts (Sullivan, 2016: 215). More recently, Buddhist monks protesting land reform have been threatened by the regime with banishment from the order or arrest (Chandran, 2017). Less overtly ideological in his approach than his predecessors, Hun Sen’s rule is deeply personalistic, relying on strongman tactics. Unlike in Vietnam, there have been significant domestic challenges to the Hun Sen regime. Levitsky and Way (2010: 330–337) considered it a “competitive authoritarian regime” during the 1990s and early 2000s, as the democratic opposition had a reasonable chance of unseating Hun Sen. Yet, serious election rigging since 2003, coupled with high levels of voter intimidation and physical repression, have rendered recent electoral challenges virtually meaningless.

While the Khmer Rouge destroyed the remnants of a weak state, the country was effectively occupied by a foreign power (Vietnam) during the 1980s. Though some advances have been made in an administrative capacity and in military modernization, the Cambodian state is still one of the poorest in Southeast Asia. Turning to coercive capacity, Cambodia features a small military and spends a small percentage of its overall GDP on this institution (World Bank, 2019).¹⁹ In these categories it is trailed only by Laos and Malaysia. In terms of government effectiveness, Cambodia ranks second worst in Southeast Asia ahead of Burma and trailing Laos (Kaufmann et al., 2010).

Laos

Though wresting power from a decaying quasi-monarchical regime was comparatively easy, the task of post-1975 governance for the Lao People’s Revolutionary party (LPRP) proved to be far more challenging. Hoping to consolidate their power over the country through a unifying ideology and Leninist party tactics, the regime neither inherited, nor was capable of creating, powerful coercive or bureaucratic state apparatuses relative to Vietnam.²⁰ In its early years, it faced considerable armed resistance from upland minority groups, as well as an economy in tatters. Prior to seizing power in 1975, the LPRP sought to co-opt monks into the party apparatus, as revolutionaries saw the utility of courting Buddhist clergy. In a deeply divided society, Ladwig (2017: 13) observes, “The communist movement could now plausibly claim to actively protect Buddhism, as it had integrated well-trained monks into its apparatus.” While the close relationship between the communist movement and Buddhism may appear unusual on the surface, the former successfully persuaded large numbers of Buddhist monks that core themes in both traditions such as economic justice and compassion for the poor were compatible. Furthermore, highly influential

political elites such as Prince Souphanouvong (1909–1995) made rhetorical appeals to Buddhism while also advancing a communist agenda (Ladwig, 2017: 11).

Not long after formally seizing power in 1975, the regime took a more draconian approach to organized Buddhism, partially to appeal to non-Buddhist minorities (Ladwig, 2017: 14). This abrupt change in policy is reflective of changing strategic imperatives for a regime seeking to expand control over an ethnically and religiously diverse population. In the late 1970s, the Lao LPRP instituted changes intended to scale back the ability of its citizens to make direct donations to Buddhist organizations. Meanwhile, monks were subjected to Marxist re-education and placed under the strict supervision of a new oversight committee (Holt, 2009: 142). Simultaneously, the two major Theravada Buddhist sects were unified under the supervision of the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization. Ladwig (2017: 15) writes:

Under the leadership of Phoumi Vongvichit and Maha Thepbuali, the sangha became linked to the communist party's mass organization, the Lao National Front for Reconstruction. Sectarian divisions between Thammayut and Mahanikay monks were abolished by force and integrated into the Lao Buddhist Fellowship Organization.

This is indicative of a dual strategy of cooptation and coercion whereby the LPRP sought to recruit high-ranking monks to support regime goals, while also dissolving sectarianism through compulsory integration.

Civil war in Laos, though it led to the victory of the Pathet Lao, did not result in the destruction of the state as it did in Cambodia. In this case, the strategic differences between the Pathet Lao and Khmer Rouge are significant. While the LPRP feared alienating ethnic minorities and the Buddhist establishment, the Khmer Rouge sought to punish Vietnamese and Cham Muslim minorities, while nearly destroying organized Buddhism. The Khmer Rouge had enough coercive capacity to seize power domestically, but this was ultimately not enough to repel a Vietnamese invasion. Conversely, the LPRP knew that they lacked the strong coercive and bureaucratic resources required to dominate society, so they shifted to accommodationist policies instead. Throughout the 1970s and 1980s, regime policies toward religion were frequently adapted and then revised based upon the regime's domestic standing. In lean times, the regime had to rely upon Buddhism as an important pillar of legitimacy (Holt, 2009: 174). Most importantly, state weakness in Laos meant that the LPRP was more likely to experiment with both religious co-optation and coercion to achieve their goals. In the end, the regime realized that it required religious support to shore up its legitimacy problem.

By the 1980s, Laos was facing a series of economic crises and engaged in a cultural and economic liberalization project mirroring Vietnam's Doi Moi policies. At this time, leadership promoted policies designed to rejuvenate the role of Buddhism in society. Public Buddhist festivals were no longer strictly regulated, and the regime took a softer approach toward regulating the religious behavior of monks. At the death of long-time leader Kaysone (1955–1992),²¹ there was a Buddhist funeral ceremony complete with chanting Buddhist monks (Stuart-Fox, 1999: 176). In this respect, circumscribed space was afforded to Buddhism in Laos. Grant Evans (1998: 67) writes: "During the liberalization of the 1980s, Buddhism, although flourishing, was still subordinate to the party's long-term aim of building socialism in Laos." Thus, despite the party's best efforts, clear ideological differences between Theravada Buddhism and socialism were never fully reconciled. However, it is evident in recent years that the regime has increasingly depended on Buddhism for ideological legitimacy.

What is most evident in Laos is that socialists in power have attempted to fuse communist ideology to Buddhism. Marxist-Leninism was gradually abandoned as a governing philosophy, and the LPRP looked for opportunities to create a state-sponsored Buddhist religion that was free of superstition (Holt, 2009: 161). This suggests that organized Buddhism in Laos has been largely co-opted by the state bureaucracy, while other religious traditions, particularly Animist and Christian, remain subject to coercion. The US State department reports that while high-ranking Buddhists work with government to create pro-Buddhist policies, certain Christian sects are forced to practice secretly in House Churches (U.S. Department of State, 2020). Yet state sponsorship of Buddhism is not without potential complications, as nearly a third of Lao citizens are not Buddhist. Instead, new regime policies toward religion may have the unintended consequence of sowing further inter-ethnic distrust. Discrimination against religious minorities in Laos remains commonplace, with non-Buddhists reporting that they must hide their religious identity to join political and social organizations (U.S. Department of State, 2020).

Laos is indicative of a state with low coercive and bureaucratic power. It spends the least amount of its annual GDP on the armed forces, which are essentially designed to address domestic rather than regional security concerns (World Bank, 2019). It is the third weakest bureaucratic/administrative state in the region, trailing only Cambodia and Burma in government effectiveness (Kaufmann et al., 2010). Furthermore, security in Laos is frequently jeopardized by the presence of embedded organized crime syndicates. Conflict between the central government in Vientiane and upland ethnic minorities has frequently erupted over drug policies, whereby the former has undertaken opium eradication as part of a broader economic and cultural civilizing mission (Cohen, 2013).

Vietnam

Unlike its neighbors Cambodia and Laos, Vietnam featured a Confucian-style bureaucracy prior to the arrival of the French. Early nationalist resistance to colonial occupation transformed into state-building efforts in North Vietnam. Mass village mobilization and land redistribution began early on in North Vietnam, and as the First Indochina War raged on, the Viet Minh had already created a Leninist-style bureaucracy. Here, the communists did not have to build from scratch as they had already inherited the building blocks of a modern state apparatus.

In 1975, the CPV had successfully emerged victorious from a lengthy war against the United States–Republic of South Vietnam coalition—though it was in truth a pyrrhic victory, as the task of post-war reconstruction fell to the new regime. Unlike in Laos and Cambodia, early state-building efforts in Vietnam paid dividends, especially when it came to governing an ideologically and religiously diverse country. In this case, the politburo relied upon a robust party apparatus (itself an indicator of a powerful bureaucratic/administrative state) to organize, extract, and regulate organized religion.

Following the withdrawal of American troops, Saigon collapsed and Vietnam fell under communist control. Shortly after unification, the CPV took direct repressive action against organized Buddhism. As Topmiller (2000: 234–235) observes, “In time, security forces raided pagodas, closed down orphanages, disbanded organized religion and placed prominent Buddhist leaders like Thich Tri Quang under house arrest or imprisonment in remote locations.” Critically, the regime moved to sponsor its own Buddhist organization, the Vietnamese Buddhist Church (VBC). Once established, the regime moved away from direct repression, and selectively targeted dissident voices.

In terms of religious organization today, the Department of Religion is charged with supervising the behavior of religious adherents across Vietnam. While not directly repressive, it does put limits on how many individuals can enter monasteries or churches for religious life (Matthews, 1992: 66). Buddhism itself is managed through the Vietnam Buddhist *sangha*. While largely self-regulating, it attempts to bring itself into closer ideological alignment with the communist state. In 1980, Matthews (1992: 68) writes, “the *sangha* adopted the charter slogan ‘Dhamma, Nation, and Socialism’.”

For its part, the Vietnamese Catholic Church has consistently feared its destruction, yet there are few major hurdles to individual religious practice. Mass attendance in South Vietnam is high, though the Catholic Church is careful not to challenge the state authorities. While it is permitted to collect foreign donations, the Vietnamese Catholic Church is proscribed from having a direct relationship with the Papacy in Rome (Matthews, 1992: 70). Since 1983, the CPV has attempted to co-opt Catholic hierarchy through the CSPVC (Committee for the Solidarity of Patriotic Vietnamese Catholics), an organization which has sought to create patriotic priests (Chu, 2008: 270). While Chu (2008) is skeptical regarding the regime’s success in this effort, this organization demonstrates the bureaucratic/administrative reach of the state into the realm of religious practice.

The 1992 constitution allows individuals to “worship or not worship,” but the Politburo strictly regulates organizations. All religions must report to the Vietnamese Fatherland Front, as religion is seen as an arm of the state (Abuza, 2001: 186). Under this arrangement, the government controls ordinations and church property. Specifically, the regime sets limits for the number of monks which can enter a monastery annually and treats monastery/church property as state property. The regime also does not want churches to undertake development activities. Relations with the Cao Dai and Hao Hoa religious sects remain poor, as the regime frequently accuses these groups of subversive activities.

In contemporary Vietnam, there is a serious disparity between the freedom afforded to individual practitioners and the restrictions placed on organized religion. As Abuza (2001: 183) remarks, the “debate over religious freedom has little to do with faith and everything to do with the right to organize outside party control.” Since the 1980s, the VBC has relaxed its controls over the practice of religion in public and has opened formally closed monasteries as cultural sites (Taylor, 2004: 44). Therefore, while individual believers are free to attend services and participate in the rituals of their faith, churches and monasteries remain closely monitored.

Since 1975, the CPV has ruled the north and the south differently. While land reform was initially successful in the north, it ran into significant problems in the south. Additionally, military threats from neighboring Cambodia and China incentivized the continued construction of the military. In the Vietnamese case, wars against the French, Americans, and Cambodians strengthened the coercive arm of the state. Financial support from the Soviet Union also improved Vietnamese military capabilities. With the impending collapse of the Soviet Union in the 1980s, and its withdrawal from Southeast Asian politics, Vietnam began to introduce a series of market reforms, while forestalling meaningful political liberalization. Despite protests from prominent religious figures and regime defectors, there is no sign that contemporary Vietnam is vulnerable to religiously based political mobilization as in Burma. Instead, the Vietnamese state has only become stronger in both bureaucratic and coercive capacity over time.²²

Vietnam’s approach to managing organized religion has remained relatively consistent over time. The growth of the coercive and bureaucratic/administrative state apparatuses after unification meant that the CPV could more effectively co-opt Buddhist and Catholics by creating hierarchical state churches. At the same time, the regime selectively employed coercive tactics targeted at

dissident religious leaders. Unlike Burma and Cambodia, post-unification Vietnam has not had to rely on extensive or long-term public crackdowns against religious figures.

In terms of coercive capacity, as measured by the number of military personnel as a percentage of the overall labor force, Vietnam dwarfed all other countries, with over 1 million troops from 1985 to 1990. Since then, partially in response to the end of its occupation in Cambodia, troop levels dropped and are now lower than neighboring Cambodia and Vietnam (World Bank, 2019). On the surface, troop reductions in Vietnam serve as a harbinger of declining coercive capacity. However, this data requires further contextualization. Over the past two decades, the Communist Party of Vietnam implemented a policy named *Doi Moi*, or “renovation,” which has amounted to economic liberalization and military demobilization. In short, while the military features fewer armed personnel than it did in the 1980s, it has shifted resources to economic projects while simultaneously placing greater emphasis on policing its citizens (Raffin, 2011). Between 2003 and 2018, Vietnam’s military expenditures grew by 687 percent (Tran, 2020). Therefore, Vietnam has modernized its military without sacrificing its capabilities.

With respect to government effectiveness, Vietnam ranks third in Southeast Asia behind Thailand and Malaysia, and far ahead of neighboring Cambodia and Laos (Kaufmann et al., 2010). This capacity developed rapidly after the conclusion of the Vietnamese War and through the gradual introduction of market reforms.

Conclusion

The evolution of regime policies toward organized religion in Cambodia, Laos, and Vietnam demonstrates that when political elites had to choose between Marxist ideological commitments and the practical matter of exercising and retaining political power, they have pursued the latter. In Cambodia, the genocidal Khmer Rouge was dislodged from power, but not before Pol Pot and his clique had nearly destroyed Buddhist practice. Since then, successive regimes have experimented with both co-optation and coercion as a means of containing religious expression. For Laos, the PDR regime swiftly abandoned the jailing, killing, and re-education of monks once they recognized that they could not govern solely through coercion. Lacking a strong state and communist party organization, the LPRP became preoccupied with countering threats from ethnic and religious minority groups and sought to co-opt Buddhism as a means of enhancing their popular legitimacy in the absence of a functioning state bureaucracy and economic system.

Vietnam’s experience with organized religion stands in stark contrast to Cambodia and Laos. While the CPV in Vietnam initially relied upon violence to bring dissident religious groups under state control, their ability to create a hierarchical bureaucracy capable of regulating and containing domestic religious expression was never replicated to the same extent by its neighbors.²³ Through the co-optation of religious elites into state-regulated churches, Vietnam’s grip over religion is more secure than its neighbors in Laos and Cambodia. Based on the most recent Association of Religious Data Archives (2015) research, Vietnam scored 9.6 out of 10 in terms of its regulation of all religions, while Laos recorded 3.3 and Cambodia 2.1 out of 10 respectively (ARDA, 2015).²⁴ Like China, new challenges to CPV rule have come from internet-based civil society activists. However, the important takeaway is that religious groups have not posed a significant threat to the regime in decades due to a successful co-optation program executed by the state bureaucracy. While religious dissidents, particularly “Engaged Buddhists,”²⁵ have seriously questioned the CPV’s legitimacy, high-ranking Buddhist monks and Catholic priests work with the regime, albeit in a highly circumscribed manner.

The implications of these findings are important for understanding the linkages between state capacity and regime strategy, demonstrating that not all authoritarian regimes are equipped with the bureaucratic/administrative tools required to effectively co-opt organized religion. In this spirit, we can better understand why collective religiously based political resistance is rare in Vietnam but persists in Laos and Cambodia despite a history of regime violence. This research also informs policymakers who are interested in the obstacles and opportunities for promoting religious freedom and civil society in authoritarian contexts.

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Notes

4. For more on the politicization of Buddhist monks in Mainland Southeast Asia during the post-Second World War era, see Ford (2017).
5. The measures selected here represent the two most visible forms of state capacity. This is not to say that other forms of state capacity are not also worth examining; see Bustikova and Corduneanu-Huci (2017), Englehart (2009), and Ong (2018). For a detailed overview of the literature on state capacity, see Cingolani (2013).
6. The dynamic relationship between states, democratic regimes, and organized religion is outside the purview of this research.
7. Waging a successful war, particularly against a foreign power, is one important way an authoritarian regime can enhance its popular legitimacy, at least in the short term.
8. Authoritarian regime elites in the region have gone to great lengths to discredit monks who participate in political activities.
9. The notable exception is Cambodia's Khmer Rouge 1975–1979, who were inspired by Maoist philosophy. The ideological nature of these regimes has also changed over time, though there are no significant changes to the treatment of organized religion outside of Cambodia.
10. This type of state is evident in some (though certainly not all) of the world's consolidated democracies. Some examples of this type are Costa Rica and Denmark, though not the United States.
11. These states oscillate between strategies once they recognize that either coercion or co-optation alone is not effective as a means of containing threats posed by religious organizations.
12. For country-level data, see Appendices A and B.
13. See Chandler (1999). According to Chandler (1999: 152), Pol Pot lived in constant fear of assassination, and blamed his stomach problems on what he thought were cooks trying to poison him.
14. The Khmer Rouge took a particularly brutal approach to groups perceived as foreign. Part of this was rooted in their racist vision for recreating an exclusively Khmer empire. Cham Muslims were directly targeted by the regime and were forced to renounce their religious beliefs.
15. Ideologically, Pol Pot made distinctions between peasants and urban elites. Once the Khmer Rouge took control over Cambodia, the country was divided into separate administrative zones. Though conditions were deplorable across the country, so-called "new people" (urban elites) were relocated from Phnom

- Penh to northwest Cambodia and were treated with unusual brutality. In this region, rice quotas were the highest. Here, most Cambodians, unaccustomed to life outside of the city, died from disease and exhaustion.
- 16 Pol Pot expected retribution for his annihilation of the Vietnamese community in Cambodia and harbored a long-held distrust of Vietnam.
 - 17 Current Cambodian Prime Minister Hun Sen is a former member of the Khmer Rouge.
 - 18 The term *sangha* carries several different meanings in Buddhism. Here, it refers to the Buddhist monastic community.
 - 19 It is important to note that China invests heavily in Cambodia's security, which may also explain why Cambodia's military expenditures remain relatively low. For this reason, it is also difficult to ascertain how much of Cambodia's budget is formally earmarked for military spending (Hutt, 2020).
 - 20 This is not meant to imply that the LPRP did not engage in early state-building efforts, particularly in rural areas. Pholsena (2018) writes that the transformation of villagers into national subjects was integral to the communist party's state-building efforts and was indicative of the regime's goal of enhancing its legitimacy (Pholsena, 2018: 1299).
 - 21 Kayson held the title of First Chairman of the Central Committee of the Lao People's Revolutionary Party.
 - 22 This is not to say that Vietnam's state capacity has not also been undermined by endemic corruption and economic mismanagement.
 - 23 While Laos and Cambodia have built organizations capable of co-opting high-ranking Buddhist leadership, they have also turned to coercive strategies toward religious minorities on the one hand, and dissident monks on the other.
 - 24 ARDA ranks countries based upon the extent to which the government regulates religious practice. The scale runs from zero to 10, with zero indicating less government regulation of religious practice.
 - 25 For more on engaged Buddhism in Vietnam, see Queen and King (1996).

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Appendix A: National military capabilities (World Bank).

| Country | Armed military personnel as % of total labor force | Military expenditure as % GDP |
|----------|--|-------------------------------|
| Laos | 3.5 (2018) | 0.8 (2013) |
| Cambodia | 2.1 (2018) | 2.3 (2019) |
| Vietnam | 0.9 (2018) | 2.0 (2011) |

Appendix B: Worldwide Governance Indicators 2019 (World Bank).

| Country | Government effectiveness (-2.5, 2.5) | Percentile rank |
|----------|---|-----------------|
| Laos | -0.78 | 31.73 |
| Cambodia | -0.58 | 25.48 |
| Vietnam | 0.04 | 53.85 |